

Encyclopedia of Social Work

Human Needs: Overview

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Sections have been rewritten to reflect the most up-to-date resources, and additional sections have been added.

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Abstract and Keywords

Human need and related concepts such as basic needs have long been part of the implicit conceptual foundation for social work theory, practice, and research. However, while the published literature in social work has long stressed social justice, and has incorporated discussion of human rights, human need has long been both a neglected and contested concept. In recent years, the explicit use of human needs theory has begun to have a significant influence on the literature in social work.

Keywords: human need, human needs, basic needs, fundamental needs, universal needs, human rights, social justice, injustice, needs assessment, empowerment, well-being, quality of life

Introduction

This article presents a comprehensive overview of the literature on human needs for use in social work. For further references to these and other theories of human need, please see the *Oxford Bibliographies in Social Work* entry on human needs (Dover, 2010A). The section on the History of Usage of Needs Concepts in Social Work reviews early social work thinking about human needs. The Theories of Human Need section briefly discusses the hierarchical human needs theory of Abraham Maslow (1943, 1971). Maslow's work is briefly discussed in order to demonstrate the impact of his work on the current theories of human need, including the theory of human need (THN) and its central concepts of health and autonomy (Len Doyal & Gough, 1984, 1991); and self-determination theory (SDT),

a psychological theory of human needs, and its central concepts of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2011).

The section on SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION fully reviews the early attention to need in social work education and the subsequent neglect of the concept. For the section SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY, Dean's *Understanding Human Needs* (2010) summarizes the social policy analysis value of THN, which has more recently been used in considerable social policy research related to global social justice and social sustainability. The section on SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE discusses recent contributions to the social work literature (Jani & Reisch, 2011), recent philosophical contributions relevant to social work practice (Brock, 2009; S. C. Miller, 2012) and recent uses of THN in the social work practice literature (Dover, 2009; O'Brien, 2010).

The SOCIAL RESEARCH section discusses the substantial research drawing on SDT, a psychological theory of human need which is now being more widely used in social work. The SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTION section discusses the role of discourse on universal human needs and their culturally unique expression for an emancipatory social work approach (Mullaly, 2001), and acknowledges the need to empower communities to engage in autonomous needs definition (Ife, 2009). The SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS section acknowledges early use of the concept of human need (Boehm, 1958; Reamer, 1993; Timms, 1983), although it was not until 1997 that the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers utilized the concept of human needs (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). In the FUTURE TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES section, and throughout this entry, questions about needs are raised, in order to produce critical thinking and discussion about the place of human needs theories and concepts in social work ethics, theory and practice.

History of Theories of Human Need in Social Work

Human needs concepts have long been central to the assumptions underlying social work practice (Dover & Joseph, 2008; Jani & Reisch, 2011), including in the “life model” of practice (Germain & Gitterman, 2008). The first social worker to seriously address the question of human needs was Charlotte Towle, in her book *Common Human Needs* (Towle, 1945), which was primarily a training manual for public assistance workers. The book represented what today would be considered a text on human behavior in the social environment. In work that is still cited and discussed today (Jani & Reisch, 2011), Towle contended that social workers needed to understand the interrelatedness of human needs. She concluded there are universal needs such as food, clothing, and housing that are required for physical health and mental health. Towle adopted a hierarchical outlook,

in that she viewed so-called dependency needs as fundamental to achieving the need for independence. She viewed these needs as universal but as developmental, in that they vary in nature at various points in the life cycle. In noting its continued relevance, Jani and Reisch (2011) situated Towle's work within emerging human behavior theory. They noted that Towle recognized both universal needs and the contextually specific ways in which they are addressed, but contended that that recognition was often obscured during later developments in social work, which often assumed needs were purely universal (Towle, 1945). Jani and Reisch (2011) pointed out that Towle discussed developmental variations in need satisfaction, and was a pioneer in understanding the role of social content on individual behavior.

David Gil's Work on Human Needs

In recent decades, David Gil has been the only well-known and consistent proponent of the centrality of human needs theory for social work. Gil identified a hierarchical set human needs that included meaningful human relationships; meaningful work (including creative activity); a sense of security based on fulfilling work and relationships; self-actualization (Maslow, 1970); and spiritual needs (Gil, 1992, 2004). Gil analyzed social welfare policy on the basis of its contribution to addressing human needs (1992), and concluded that human needs must be addressed in order to achieve social justice (2004). In the five editions of *Unravelling Social Policy*, Gil pioneered proposals for making analysis of human needs central to social policy (1992). According to Gil, all human societies throughout history have experienced a wide range of biologically and socially shaped needs. These include food, shelter, and clothing health, education, work, and recreation; creativity, recognition, communication, self-expression, and human relations. Needs experienced in the context of relative scarcities and the pursuit of provisions to satisfy these needs are a major source of the evolution of human social orders (Gil, 1976).

In later work, Gil (1984) identified several intrinsic and existential human needs, including (a) regular access to life sustaining and enhancing goods and services; (b) meaningful social relations and a sense of belonging to a community involving mutual respect, acceptance, affirmation, care and love; (c) meaningful and creative participation in accordance with one's innate capacities and stage of development in productive processes of one's community and society; (d) a sense of security, derived from continuous fulfillment of needs for life-sustaining and enhancing goods and services, meaningful relations, and meaningful participation in socially valued productive processes; and (e) becoming all that one is capable of becoming or, in Maslow's terms, self-actualization through creative, productive work. Gil further stated that the extent to which these basic needs are capable of being realized depends upon the structures,

dynamics, and values of the social order, specifically, the manner in which: “means of production are controlled, used, and developed and conserved; work and production are organized, goods and services are exchanged and distributed; and social, civil and political rights are distributed” (p. 26).

More recently, Gil has also argued that human needs concepts are essential to understanding the meaning of social justice (Gil, 2004). Gil viewed human needs as including the following inter-related dimensions: (a) social/psychological needs for meaningful human relationships of the I-Thou type (1937); (b) productive/creative needs such as meaningful work; (c) security needs derived from trust that the above needs have been met; (d) self-actualization needs, citing Maslow's updated edition (1970); and (e) spiritual needs, related to gleaning meaning from human existence in an unfathomable cosmos (2004).

In his most recent work, Gil (2013) emphasized that people and communities actively address their needs in ways that depend upon their social circumstances. However, in doing so they often face systems of oppression rooted in exploitation. These systems rely upon socially structured violence to maintain systems of economic and social privilege. Since Wilensky and Lebeaux's early contention that advanced social welfare systems required an integrative view of human needs (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1958), Gil's work has been the primary expression of human needs theory within the field of social work. Throughout his work, Gil has championed human needs and opposed all forms of oppression (Gil, 2013). In receiving the Noam Chomsky Award from the Justice Studies Association, Gil's (2008) presentation focused on the centrality of addressing human needs for individual and social development and for the pursuit of global social justice.

Needs Theory in Social Work's Interdisciplinary Foundations

As a profession, social work draws on an interdisciplinary intellectual and research foundation. Our profession responds to the voices of clients and communities who are addressing and articulating their needs. We also engage in active needs assessment, although we often fail to distinguish between service needs and human needs and fail to recognize human capabilities (McKnight, 1989). We draw upon theoretical work and research findings from science, social science and the humanities.

In philosophy, ever since the classical period, philosophers have considered human needs to be an essential part of human nature (Thomson, 1987). However, McCloskey (1976) concluded that there had been little explicit philosophical discussion of human need. David Wiggins (1998), a major contemporary philosopher, further clarified the distinction between wants and needs, distinguished absolute from instrumental needs, and

demonstrated that at the individual and community levels, there are objective, identifiable, non-circumstantial necessary conditions that are required in order to avoid serious harm. Wiggins also criticized theories of justice that don't incorporate a conception of need (2005).

Following the issuance of the book-length THN (Len Doyal & Gough, 1991), the discourse grew (Brock, 1994, 1997), with important additional work appearing in the next decade (Reader, 2005; Wiggins, 2005, 2006). Soon there was an acceleration of contributions about human needs within philosophy (Assiter & Noonan, 2007; Brock, 2009; S. C. Miller, 2012; Noonan, 2006B, 2012; Reader, 2011), with well over a third of all citations of Doyal and Gough (1991) coming since 2007.

Within sociology, the trend has been to underemphasize questions about human nature, in favor of examination of the socially structured nature of social problems (Wrong, 1961). Etzioni (1968) responded by proposing that human needs theory might correct for Wrong's concern about sociology's over-socialized theorization of humankind. House and Mortimer (1990) called for enhanced examination of endogenous attributes such as human nature and human needs, with care being taken to avoid reductionist biological explanations for social phenomena. Sociologist and gerontologist Carroll Estes (2008) has since explicitly endorsed THN, concluding that it is necessary to view human needs as objective, universal, and transcultural.

In economics, according to Gasper (2009), the concept of human need was found in the early literature on welfare economics. More recently, Williams (2012) has provided a valuable overview of the usage of the concept of needs within economics. Ian Gough, co-author of THN, has recently re-published a chart of the original theory in an article in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (Gough, 2015).

In political science, there has been increased attention to human needs theory in recent years, including use of THN to discuss needs-based human rights as the foundation for a just securitization theory of international relations (Floyd, 2011; D. Miller, 2012). Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1992) pioneered the use of thought experiments on human preferences for various policy options related to human needs. These were later used in Brock's (2009) work on global social justice.

In anthropology, some work has stressed the objective universality of human rights and other value systems (Brown, 1991; Renteln, 1990), while other work has sought a middle ground between universalism and cultural relativism (Cohen, 1989). However, Rist (1980) had earlier critiqued the human needs approach to global social policy and stressed the value of localized quality of life research that could prevent external elites from prescribing local needs, a concern shared by Ife (2009).

Within psychology, it was only recently that a chapter on human needs appeared in a major handbook or annual review in the field of social psychology (Pittman & Ziegler, 2007). SDT succeeds a long tradition of early psychological contributions to human needs theory, outlined in *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (Dover, 2010A). Murray (1938) drew on research with male college students to distinguish between manifest and latent needs linked to drives for achievement, affiliation, and power. Maslow (1943) moved beyond lists of needs and proposed a hierarchical human needs theory, which posited that physiological and safety needs had to be addressed prior to fulfilling needs such as belonging/love and self-actualization. Maslow (1943) made clear that although he viewed his theory as universal, there were culturally varying preferences for how to address needs. Maslow (1971) later revised his hierarchy of needs to include self-transcendence, according to Koltko-Rivera (2006).

Theories of Human Need

There has been a significant recent increase in the use of human needs theory within social work. Four significant theoretical frameworks are discussed extensively here (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Doyal & Gough, 1991; Ife, 2013; Jani & Reisch, 2011). The two formal theories, the theory of human need (THN) of Doyal and Gough and the self-determination theory (SDT) of Deci and Ryan are discussed here. Due to its significance for social work thinking about human rights and human needs, the work of Ife is discussed in the section on NEEDS, RIGHTS AND JUSTICE, later in this entry. Due to its relevance for social work practice, the transformational integrative multidimensional evolutionary (TIME) model of Jani and Reisch (2011) is discussed in the section on SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

Recently, there has been considerable recent use of such theories in social work (Blakey, 2012), particularly in child welfare (Axford, 2009; O'Brien, 2010). There have also been new theoretical developments within the profession (Bonnycastle, 2011; Connolly & Ward, 2008; Jani & Reisch, 2011). Given this increased attention to human needs theory, it is important to briefly summarize THN and SDT.

Theory of Human Need of Doyal and Gough (THN)

The THN of the philosopher Doyal and political economist Gough was the first formal, philosophically constructed theory of human needs to be presented in book length. According to the theory, there is a hierarchical relationship between certain fundamental societal conditions, culturally specific satisfiers, intermediate needs, and two basic needs (health and autonomy), which are seen as necessary for avoiding serious harm while

engaging in social participation that is not unduly restricted. For a chart of this hierarchical relationship, please see Gough (2015).

Among the universal social conditions required for addressing basic needs are these social systems: production, reproduction, cultural transmission, and political authority. These conditions permit access to a range of specific satisfiers, consisting of culturally and environmentally varying ways of achieving at least a minimally optimal level of these intermediate needs: adequately nutritional food and water, adequate housing, non-hazardous work and physical environments, appropriate health care, security in childhood, significant primary relationships; economic security; safe birth control and child-bearing, and basic education (Doyal & Gough, 1991; Gough, 2000). Those intermediate needs must be satisfied at a minimally optimal level in order to meet two primary basic needs, physical health and autonomy of agency. In turn, these two needs must be met in order to avoid serious harm and engage in social participation (Doyal, 1998; Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Autonomy of agency is viewed as a construct involving mental health, cognitive non-deprivation, and relatively unrestricted opportunities for choice, without which social participation is significantly restricted, thus making avoidance of serious harm less likely. Doyal (1998) clarified that there are three measurable variables related to the achievement of autonomy: adequate information and understanding about one's environment, achieved via cultural transmission and education of some kind; psychological capacity rooted in rationality and emotionality; and existent opportunities for exercising autonomy.

When health and autonomy needs are met together, presumably in varying degree of fulfillment of health and autonomy needs, those individuals and communities whose needs are satisfied may reach the universal goal of avoidance of serious harm. However, the Doyal-Gough theory overview also has a vertically parallel “right-hand” track, which portrays the path to human liberation, which is defined as critical participation in a chosen form of life. This requires both health and critical autonomy, not merely health and basic autonomy. The foundation for critical autonomy is in enhanced societal preconditions. In addition to a social system of political authority, there must be a social system that involves actual political participation, not merely a minimally participatory system of governance/social control. Furthermore, while there must be social systems of production, reproduction, and cultural transmission from generation to generation, there are additional preconditions for optimization of the societal preconditions for need satisfaction. These include enhanced societal preconditions for optimization such as negative freedoms (civil and political rights) and positive freedoms (such as established human rights to effective need satisfiers.)

Based on this enhanced set of societal preconditions, an enhanced set of specific satisfiers produces more than a minimally optimal level of intermediate need satisfaction, in a way that produces a truly optimum level of basic need satisfaction, one characterized not merely by health and autonomy, but by health and critical autonomy. Notably, one unique requirement for critical autonomy is not only a system of cultural transmission within a particular society but access to cross-cultural knowledge of alternative ways of life. Without knowledge of a variety of such alternatives, as opposed to those passed down via cultural transmission from within one's society, critical autonomy cannot be achieved. However, achievement of basic levels of health and autonomy are seen as necessary for achieving such a critical social construction of how to engage in critical participation in one's chosen form of life.

Doyal and Gough (1991) viewed their theory as a theory of universal human need and of culturally determined satisfiers. This is seen as central to the culturally and environmentally specific satisfiers that are at the root of their theory.

Among critiques of THN, Drover and Kerans (1993) contended that needs definitions are appropriately defined not by any theory, but by social movements rooted in subjectively articulated claims, although such movements might ultimately articulate universal definitions of what are considered our true needs. In a later critique (Tao & Drover, 1997), THN was found over-dependent upon a Western concept of autonomy and under-appreciative of social obligation. Others drew on THN, but have sought to incorporate emerging conceptualizations of caring and obligation (S. C. Miller, 2012) or of interdependency (Dean, 2009) into theory of human need. Noonan (2012) critiqued THN and other needs theorists on whether they prioritize universal, organic life requirements for survival over more comprehensive concepts of need. In doing so, they confine the conceptualization of social justice to those needs that could conceivably be met within the existing structures of capitalism. A similar critique of THN was made by Schuppert (2013), namely that Doyal and Gough overstate the role of needs as opposed to other interests, within the realm of the justification for rights.

Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan

Self-determination theory (SDT) is an influential psychological theory of human needs. It is rooted in the humanistic tradition but spans developmental, personality, social, and cognitive psychology. The theory has been applied to practice at both the micro and macro levels and is supported by a large and growing body of empirical research. SDT utilizes the concept of eudemonia (self-realization), positing that needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy must be satisfied in order to achieve three things: (a) psychological growth (related to the expression of autonomous motivation), (b) human

integrity (which varies in nature due to the culturally specific assimilation and internalization of culturally specific practices), and (c) well-being (measured in terms of psychological health and life satisfaction). Their approach utilizes various established measures of hedonic well being, primarily those associated with the vast literature on subjective well-being (SWB). However, SDT sees them as outcome measures for well being, the achievement of which rests upon the satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

A unifying factor in the theory is human motivation, differentiated into a typology of autonomous and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation is linked to human activity that is valued and volitional, rather than controlled motivation, which corresponds to activity that is required or coerced in nature. Intrinsic motivation, the topic of Deci's first book (Deci, 1975), is consistent with the concept of autonomous motivation found in SDT. Nix, Ryan, Manly, and Deci (1999) said that SDT explains the locus of causality of human behavior by utilizing the concepts of autonomous motivation (which involves personally exercised agency) and controlled motivation (which involves being pressured or coerced by both interpersonal and intrapersonal forces).

Social learning within diverse cultures can lead to an internalization process over the life course, thus producing an intrinsic motivation for the associated behavior (Deci, 2012). More precisely, intrinsically motivated behavior is considered autonomously motivated by SDT. This revision of the previously established typology of motivation as being intrinsic or extrinsic is the foundation of self-determination theory. The aspect of SDT that concerns us here is its theory of fundamental psychological needs. The first is a need to feel competent about life tasks, without which negative self-evaluation can develop. Lack of perceived competence has been found to produce poor psychological outcomes across human cultures. The second is a need for relatedness, which produces psychological pain when not fulfilled. Finally, people have a psychological need for autonomous, self-regulated individual activity.

Just as activity originating in controlled motivation can potentially be internalized into one's set of intrinsically motivated behaviors, autonomously motivated activity that receives regular external reinforcements can lead to diminished autonomous motivation to continue that behavior and its externalization to the status of a controlled motivational activity (Deci, 2012). This is consistent with SDT's prioritization of autonomous, self-regulated activity as a basic need.

Comparing SDT and THN

There are several points of compatibility between SDT and THN. For THN, significant primarily relationships are an intermediate need, a prerequisite for achieving autonomy,

while for SDT relatedness is a basic need. Thus, relationships, a fundamental value for social work, are central to both theories.

The basic compatibility of SDT and THN has been commented upon by the developers of each theory. The work of Ryan and Sapp (2007) made clear that both theories posit an objective basis for the identified needs. These needs are generalizable across cultures, but are addressed in each culture in distinct manners. This is consistent with each theory's reliance upon autonomy as a fundamental requirement for human growth and actualization. The theory recognizes the needs for multiple sources of the nourishment required for humans to thrive and to avoid deterioration of health. With respect to needs being objective, Ryan and Sapp (2007) pointed out that people are often not subjectively aware of their needs.

Gough (2004) commented that the parallels between SDT and THN are clear. They include the shared use of autonomy, including a view of autonomy that refers not to independence or a lack of interdependence, but rather to "self-regulation and volition, the recognition that acts are undertaken by you, not done to you" (p. 303). According to Gough (2004), SDT builds on Maslow and Fromm to provide a psychological theory of eudemonic well being, and SDT's three basic universal psychological needs provide a foundation for more detailed study of human actions by hedonic psychology.

In other words, SDT provides a way of distinguishing behavior oriented to human wants and desires that are or are not directed towards addressing basic needs, or that involve what might be considered their over-satisfaction. Moreover, as Gough (2004) has pointed out, THN extensively discussed several concepts, including cultural understanding, self-esteem, and cognitive skills, which are consistent with the centrality of competence in SDT (Len Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Camfield and Skevington (2008) have thoroughly compared the two theories. They pointed out that both THN and SDT utilize the concept of eudemonism, seen as the integration and realization of actualized potential. Also, both theories are centered on autonomy, thus providing a conceptual bridge between them. Earlier, Camfield and Skevington (2002) pointed out that the concept of autonomy is reinforced by several decades of research on the concepts of choice, control and mastery and their relationship. As may be apparent, findings related to choice are relevant to the volitional foundation of the concepts of autonomy used in SDT, and the concepts of control and mastery are related to the role of competence in SDT.

Particularly relevant for social work, both SDT and THN stress the central importance of human relationships. For SDT, relatedness is one of three basic psychological needs and is correlated with the need for autonomy. The root of such relatedness is relationship.

SDT drew on Baumeister and Leary's concept of persistent caring relationships (1995). For THN, the concept parallel to relatedness is significant primary relationships. Such relationships are among a number of intermediate needs (including food, water, etc.) that are prerequisites to two basic needs, health and autonomy (Doyal & Gough, 1991).

According to Richard Ryan, co-developer of SDT, and Aislinn Sapp (2007), the conditions that support rather than detract from the ability to achieve autonomy also contribute to addressing competence and relatedness. Autonomy, relatedness, and competence are three interdependent necessities. Ryan and Sapp also agreed with the stress on autonomy of THN (2007). Autonomy is seen in both theories not as part of a Western, individualist notion of human independence, but in terms of self-regulated participation in an interdependent process (Gough, 2004). As such, autonomy is posited by SDT as a requirement for the full realization of human potential and by THN as essential to individuals and, collectively, for avoiding serious harm and optimizing social participation.

One other way in which SDT and THN are seen as convergent is that the central concept of competence in SDT is consistent with basic elements of THN. This includes cognitive skills, cultural understanding, self-esteem, and critical autonomy, all of which THN sees as required for full participation in one's chosen way of life (Gough, 2004).

For both SDT and THN, the satisfaction of basic human needs is necessary for the ability of people and communities to avoid serious harm. No matter how one views human subjective well being from the standpoint of a particular culture, such harm avoidance requires relatively unhindered social participation, and human flourishing requires a more optimal level of such participation.

Finally, SDT and THN both claim to constitute universal theories of human need that are also relevant cross-culturally. They do not claim that needs are perceived and addressed identically in each culture. However, both theories claim that the basic requirements for human flourishing and avoidance of harm require similar thresholds of psychological, physiological, and environmental inputs. These inputs are harnessed in myriad ways in our diverse cultures. However, they are seen by SDT and THN as demonstrably related to conceptually bounded and distinct sets of universal human needs, with THN constructed according to philosophical principles (THN), and SDT evolving from decades of psychological theorization and research (SDT).

Conceptual Issues for Social Work's Use of Human Needs Theory

Complex and confusing conceptual problems were found with early human needs theory (Kahn, 1957). Instead, social work relied on Lewin's field theory and general systems theory as the cornerstones of social work education's ecosystems perspective (Hearn, 1979; Lewin, 1947), despite Maslow's specific warning that field theory should not be a substitute for needs theory (Maslow, 1943). With respect to human needs, social work had what has been deemed a conceptual problem to solve (Laudan, 1977; Tucker, 1994). Conceptual problems involve theoretical issues, which may be solved either by meta-theoretical discussion or by providing well-constructed conceptual definitions of abstract concepts. These concepts can then be operationalized and utilized to solve empirical problems and to shed light on the overarching conceptual problems themselves (Dover, 2010B). This section will briefly summarize several conceptual problems, identifying readings for further consultation, but not seeking to fully discuss recent efforts to resolve them.

One conceptual problem concerns the relationship of human needs and human well-being. Taylor (2011) expressed concern about an overly narrow view of individual well-being, rather than a balanced approach to understanding well-being in terms of both objective circumstances and subjective perceptions, as proposed by Gough, McGregor and Camfield (2007). In comparing human well-being (1992) to quality of life (QoL), Camfield and Skevington (2008) acknowledged objective and subjective aspects of each. The authors concluded that, based upon research findings, subjective well-being (SWB) and subjective QoL are really synonymous.

Another conceptual problem concerns how human need theory accounts for spiritual needs. After all, religious and spiritual practices are important for conceptions of human need (Canda, 2008). The stress of THN and SDT on intrinsically important human relationships in addressing human needs provides an avenue for fuller exploration of the place of spiritual needs within human needs theory. Such relationships are also found within the framework of the practice of religious rituals, which have been found to be fundamental in the evolution of human culture (Rappaport, 1999).

Needs are not the same as preferences (Gough & Thomas, 1994). One recent effort to compare needs and wants (Gasper, 2004) saw three modes of contrasts, in which the meaning of wants was consistent (wishes, desires, and impulses). Gasper (2004) parsed culturally relative notions of needs as wants and universally relevant determinations regarding intermediate needs, regardless of how they are addressed differentially in various cultures. Miller (2012) recognized the importance of distinguishing needs from

desires and provided an important example of an anomaly to her overall assertion that fundamental needs normally have more moral import than desires (p. 23). She gave the example of a dying child with a last wish that involved the expenditure of resources that might have been used to extend life, to be used instead for a long wished-for family vacation.

The advent of postmodernist critiques of theories of human need requires social work attention to their implications, including their contribution to the distinctions between needs and desires. In addition to the critique of Jani and Reisch (2011), and the work of James Ife (2013), the work of Lévinas (Lévinas & Robbins, 2001) has been drawn on by social work critics of overreliance on needs theory and other pre-conceived theorizations (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Rossiter, 2011). Rossiter (2011) proposed Lévinasian ethics, rooted in reflective and reflexive practice, as one way to avoid unduly imposing our own conceptions on those with whom we work. Ben-Ari and Strier, and Rossiter, respectively, recognized that prioritizing ethics before knowledge is also related to our responsibility to oppose oppression and to work for social justice. This recognition prompted them to recognize an ethical responsibility to transform how we conceptualize justice (Rossiter, 2011) and how we conceive cultural competence (Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010).

The relative value of theorizing needs for individuals as opposed to utilizing the concept of capabilities is also major source of conceptual confusion. Both Sen (Sen, 1985, 1999) and Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000) have used the concept of human capabilities in their work on international social development. According to Gasper (2004), Sen critiqued the basic material needs approach (BMN) of the 1970s, discussed by Wisner (1988), as being overly concerned with commodities rather than capabilities. Nussbaum built upon Rawls (1971) and Sen (1985) in order to further theorize a list of universal human capabilities, which she saw as relevant to developing constitutional provisions to ensure that these capabilities can be achieved. An earlier working paper comparing the concept of human needs in THN and the theorization of capabilities in (Gough, 2003) has now been updated and published (Gough, 2014), in a book edited by Comim and Nussbaum (2014). The two theories are seen as addressing a basically similar agenda.

For social work, perhaps the most common source of conceptual confusion concerns the relationship of needs and strengths. The strengths perspective sought to avoid stigmatizing clients as needy, as this could disempower the people and communities with whom we work (Saleebey, 2006). Arguably, however, the strengths perspective's focus on human capabilities is fully consistent with the use of the capabilities concept in human needs theory (Alkire, 2005; Gough, 2004; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1985), as well as with the central premises of THN and SDT. For instance, Lee, Zaharlick, and Akers (2011) drew on both the strengths perspective and on SDT to conclude that coping with past trauma is

enhanced by purposively identifying and addressing needs and goals as they are relevant to the context of the client's current life.

One final conceptual problem discussed here is the question of the universality and cultural specificity of human needs. The stress of Murray and Maslow on the universality of human needs prompted Dorothy Lee (1948) to argue that each culture defines itself based upon its own expressed values. Lee criticized hierarchies of need and contended that needs were unique within different societies (D. Lee, 1948, 1959). Early on, Boehm argued that human needs were both universal and culturally specific (Boehm, 1958). More recently, Noonan (2012) distinguished between objective organic life requirements and more comprehensive conceptualizations of need, although staking a claim that both can be defended as universal; and McLeod distinguished between universal absolute needs and relative needs related to goals (McLeod, 2011). In later work, McLeod (2014) further clarified the distinction between universal existence needs for survival, welfare needs (which are seen as necessary to avoid serious harm), and perfectionist needs, seen as necessary to flourish. McLeod's concept of perfectionist needs is compatible with THN's contention that critical autonomy, not just basic need satisfaction, is required for human liberation (defined as participation in one's chosen form of life). As debates continue about whether needs are universal or relative, the trend appears to be oriented to more precise definitions of the nature of the concepts utilized.

Social Work Education

Early on in the evolution of social work education, content on human needs was seen as central. Herbert Stroup (Stroup, 1953) contended that the nature of human needs should be one of seven key areas for an introductory course in social work. Bisno's book *The Philosophy of Social Work* strongly emphasized human needs content for social work's philosophical foundation (1952). Boehm (Boehm, 1956, p. 36) pointed out that social workers are concerned with meeting basic human needs as a means to the end of achieving human dignity and human fulfillment, with needs themselves seen as culturally conditioned. One social policy textbook, still widely used until the 1970s, contended that functional generalization tied to an integrative view of human needs was a key aspect of an advanced system of social welfare (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1958). Harold Lewis (1981) advocated for a comprehensive curriculum model based on a human needs rubric. Blake (1994) presented a curriculum contribution to content on human needs and social diversity.

The 2004 standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2004) focused in the preamble on human well-being, human rights, and social and economic justice, and in the purpose of

the social work profession, balanced content on human well-being, opposition to injustice, promotion of justice, and the pursuit of policies that addressed human needs and human capacities. With the adoption of new competency-based standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2008), however, specific language on human need was replaced by a focus on human rights, and content on human and community well-being. The 2015 standards include, for the first time, a specific requirement in Competency 3 (Council on Social Work Education, 2015): “Social workers understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations, and are knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights” (p. 5).

Social Welfare Policy

Dean's *Understanding Human Needs* (2010) has summarized the social policy analysis value of THN, which has been used in considerable recent social policy research (Doyal & Doyal, 2013; Guillen-Royo, Velazco, & Camfield, 2013; McGregor, Camfield, & Woodcock, 2009; O'Neill, 2011; Ward & Johnson, 2013). Increasingly, such research draws on both THN and the capabilities approach (Alkire, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000) in ways that are increasingly apparent (Gough, 2014).

One issue has been whether or not it was possible to fully address human needs within the context of advanced capitalist economies (Dokecki, 1985; Warshawsky, 1985). The question of whether or not the needs of people and the needs of capital can co-exist within modern industrial democracies is a central one. Gough (2000) described the differences between human needs and capital needs, but denied that these needs are impossible to reconcile.

The question of global social justice, and related issues of global environmental sustainability, is increasingly at the center of social policy debates. In *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*, Brock (2009) said that in order to examine issues of global justice, it is essential to understand the relationships among three things (needs, entitlements, and incentives), which social actors typically seek to harmonize. Drawing on Frolich and Oppenheimer (1992), she reported that, when engaged in dialogue about what kinds of social arrangements are most fair and impartial, people sought a social commitment to address basic needs, but one that didn't undermine various entitlements, and rights that didn't dampen incentives. This demonstrated empirical support for the centrality of human needs and supported Brock's contention that political and social arrangements should permit reasonable opportunities to address basic needs. She favored utilizing the various indicators for measuring need-satisfaction proposed by THN, including that of

Gough and McGregor (2007), as well as other approaches that drew upon THN (Gasper, 2004).

She recognized that needs that matter morally are those that are absolutely necessary (indispensable, inescapable) for human social participation, including the exercise of agency in order to address autonomy needs (Brock, 2009). She concluded that any conceptualization of global justice requires a robust theory of needs that demonstrates what needs are compelling.

The sustainability of economic development and the rights of future generations were addressed in *The Theory of Human Need* (1991), not merely as economic questions but as moral concerns.

A variety of approaches to human need were drawn on in one significant recent attempt to study the question of sustainability (Rauschmayer, Omann, & Frühmann, 2011). Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef stressed the importance of incorporating concepts of human need, well-being, and quality of life into the aims of sustainable development (Max-Neef, 2011). Max-Neef's work also drew on work by O'Neill (2011). In more recent work, Gough (2015) drew on this work and addressed questions of climate change, from the standpoint of sustainability. Gough concluded that THN has value for longitudinal empirical measures of consumption, environmental decline, and levels of human well being across generations.

Social Work Practice

Needs concepts were not a central component of any conceptual model for social work practice until the recent publication of the TIME model of Jani and Reisch (2011).

Exceptions included the Life Model, which included attention to how social workers seek to unite goodness-of-fit between people's needs and their social environment into the method of service being used (Germain & Gitterman, 2008). Goodness-of-fit was seen as taking place between life tasks, needs, and goals and stimuli or resources (Germain & Gitterman, 1979), but the model did not fully incorporate any needs concepts. Also, for macro practice, Joseph contended that human needs approaches can inform community organizing and social re-structuring (Joseph, 1986).

Early social work use of THN called for the theory's use in enriching social work practice theory (Dover, 1993). A growing body of literature arising from philosophy makes a number of suggestions that may be relevant for incorporating needs concepts into social work practice (Brock, 2009; S. C. Miller, 2012; Reader, 2007). For instance, Brock argued that

we have a moral responsibility to “enable others to meet their needs themselves,” and in doing so, she asked and answered a question that is important for the profession of social work (Brock, 2009): “What is it to enable someone to meet a need? Sometimes we need to focus on the person's capacities, sometimes on the opportunities, external structures, or environment” (p. 900).

Recently, O'Brien (2010) drew on THN to stress that, in child welfare practice, needs should be seen both as requisites and as goals that inform both developmental and ecological perspectives. Recognizing the value of theories of universal human need, O'Brien (2010) pointed out the value of identifying additional specific objective health and autonomy needs and need satisfiers, and seeking to understand how those need needs receive subjective interpretation.

Although SDT originated in the 1980s, only in recent years have these theories been widely cited in journals in social work and related fields. In *Social Work*, Williams and Strean (2006) concluded that SDT, along with other theories, can be used in work with clients, depending on one's clinical approach and the needs of the client. In *Social Work in Health Care* (Thomas, Gray, & McGinty, 2012), a strengths-based approach to the subjective well-being of homeless people utilized both SDT and the theory of human needs of Max-Neef (1991).

Given that SDT and THN both stress the importance of relationship needs, the provision of relationship was recently stressed, both as part of services provided and incidental to such provision (Dover, 2013). Also, a conceptualization of theories of oppression, dehumanization, and exploitation, and a contribution to the literature on cross-cultural practice each concluded that recognition of common human needs could enhance social workers' empathetic understanding (Dover, 2008, 2009).

The Transformational Integrative Multidimensional Evolutionary (TIME) Model

Jani and Reisch (2011) advanced the conceptual debate about the place of human needs concepts in social work, while also calling for re-examination of the needs and other concepts within prevailing and emerging theories (Reisch & Jani, 2012). Jani and Reisch (2011) devoted a section of their article to the practice implications of their TIME model. They contended that social workers should view client behavior as varying within a wide range of normal adaption to a dynamic social environment, thus avoiding static assumptions about individuals and their environments. They encouraged social workers to draw upon the model to engage in critical thinking about the impact of oppression. However, rather than posing the TIME model as a substitute for existing practice

approaches, they contended it is a framework for integrating a variety of theoretical perspectives across a range of levels of intervention.

The authors contended that, despite increased attention to cultural diversity in recent decades, social work theories of human behavior have not challenged longstanding problematic assumptions about the nature of common human needs. The resulting perceptions of what may be considered normal human behavior have not adequately shifted in response to contemporary developments in the social environment.

They critiqued theoretical frameworks that focused primarily on individual behavior, and they provided examples of how this focus often reflects cultural bias. Drawing on postmodern critical theory, they proposed the more integrated use of sociological and psychological theories, to more fully reflect the nature of social environments that evidence the impact of unique historical, structural, cultural, and institutional forces. They did not propose their TIME model as a substitute for all existing theories, but as a way to think critically about existing theoretical frameworks.

Starting from what they saw as a century of person-in-environment thinking, the TIME model recognized that people have similar life tasks but seek to address them via varying approaches. These varying ways of addressing needs and tasks can be better appreciated if one uses postmodern critical theory and macro-sociological theory in tandem. Jani and Reisch concluded that there are six common human needs: (a) intimacy within some set of significant relationships; (b) the chance to develop and express creativity; (c) opportunities for learning and growing psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually; (d) leisure and work together with peers; (e) adequate levels of material support; and (f) work that can satisfy psychological, social, and economic needs. However, the emphasis of their work was not on presenting yet another list of universal human needs, but rather on viewing all needs as nonlinear. This means that needs are multidimensional and that there is not necessarily a hierarchical relationship between biological, psychological, social, and spiritual needs. In addition, needs were seen as mutually exclusive from each other, in the sense they exist in isolation from each other. Accordingly, the typology of needs of Jani and Reisch (2011) did not present mutually exclusive components. The process of satisfying one need was seen as impacting the evolution and satisfaction of other needs, as well as how they are perceived. This dynamic model of human needs sought to transcend mere lists of needs and sought to contribute an alternative framework for thinking about needs. The authors concluded by referring to emerging theories of need, thus implicitly recognizing that there is room for further theoretical development with respect to human need.

Social Research

Similar patterns of recent growing usage of SDT and THN can be seen in social research. The SDT work of Ryan and Sapp (2007) was included in a collection edited by Gough and McGregor (2007), which focused on the use of needs theory in research on quality of life and well-being in international social development. On the surface, it would appear that THN is more macro oriented, and SDT is more micro. But contributions from each theory have been used at all levels of analysis. For instance, SDT has been used to analyze inequities in the system of capitalism (Kasser, 2002, 2011) and THN has been used to study the measurement of children's individual needs (O'Brien, 2010).

Approximately sixteen hundred theses and dissertations have now drawn on SDT, including approximately one hundred in social work. One social work dissertation at the University of Texas-Arlington (Ferron, 2007) evaluated the Treatment Motivation Questionnaire among persons with serious mental illness and found support for the value of SDT. In *Children and Youth Services Review*, Blakey (2012) drew extensively on Ryan and Deci (2000) to present research on the relationship of intrinsic motivation to external motivation among African American women pursuing family reunification. In the same journal, Gillard and Roark (2013) applied the basic needs component of SDT to study levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, with higher levels of such needs satisfaction found to be positively correlated with disclosure of HIV status.

SDT has been used in research on health, human relationships, education, parenting, work organizations, aging, medicine, and sports and recreation. In *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, Masters concluded (2006), "It also suggests the utility of advancing the theory of self-determination in enhancing the caregiving role (Deci & Ryan, 1987) by allowing the caregiver to be the ultimate decision maker in selecting a service" (p. 588).

THN has been used in cross-national comparative social welfare research (Gough, 2000), and in human well-being research (Costanza et al., 2007; Gough, McGregor, and Camfield, 2007). Operational utilizations of the Doyal-Gough theory have been used for research on women's health (McMunn, Bartley, & Kuh, 2006), risk and resilience in children (Little, Axford, & Morpeth, 2004), housing adaptations for persons with disabilities (Heywood, 2004), and community-based needs assessment (Percy-Smith & Sanderson, 1992). One study found that consumers of services were more concerned with broadly conceived universal human needs, while providers were more focused on service needs related to domestic violence, child abuse, and substance abuse (Darling, Hager, Stockdale, & Heckert, 2002). Given the research discussed here and in the earlier sections SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY and

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, if these citation patterns continue, it is likely that, in the years to come, there will be a substantial increase in the use of SDT, THN, and other emerging theories in need of research.

Social and Political Action

Gil (2004) contended that social action for social justice required a conceptualization of human needs. However, Olson's need-based conceptualization of social justice for social work called into question the extent of social work's commitment to social justice as an organizing concept (Olson, 2007). Olson viewed the meeting of physiological and safety needs as the foundation of economic justice, and contended that satisfying work, education, and cultural development is a foundation for addressing human needs for love of others and for self-love.

Human need as a concept has been used in the empowerment perspective (Cox & Joseph, 1998; Gutiérrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998). Recently, Kasser (2011) has drawn on SDT to critique Anglo-capitalism's tendency to promote extrinsic values that undermine human autonomy. Brock (2009) has suggested that THN and other needs concepts are indispensable for the emerging discussion of global justice. Seeking an alternative vision that can inform collective action by social workers, Reisch and Jani (2012) suggested drawing on critical theory to reconsider the nature of power, needs, rights and capabilities.

In one examination of anti-oppressive social work practice (Dominelli, 2002), the conceptual difficulties of attempting to capture any understanding of universal human needs are too immense to overcome. This was seen as posing a risk for neglecting or suppressing the lived experiences of diverse groups of people, with service providers instead defining needs for groups and restricting services and benefits to those determined to be in need.

In the second edition of *Confronting Injustice and Oppression* (2013), David Gil contended that social workers typically focus on symptoms rather than on causes, such as oppression and exploitation. He also continued to draw on the concept of human need to inspire social movements aimed at achieving social justice and human liberation.

Social Work Values and Ethics

Despite the fact that Reamer (1998) pointed out that the concept of common human needs was well established in social work, it was not until 1996 that the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers utilized the concept of human needs (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). This was despite references to common human needs in the 1956 Working Definition of Social Work Practice, developed by the Subcommittee on the Working Definition of Social Work Practice for the Commission on Social Work Practice, National Association of Social Workers (Bartlett, 1958).

Becoming an applied social science meant putting aside theories that were not deemed adequately scientific, such as Maslow's theory of need, and forging new theory for the field (Kahn, 1959). Instead, social work turned to eco-systems and other theories. The 1996 revision of the Code of Ethics gave human needs a prominent place in the preamble: "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people...." The Code also made reference to the distinction between needs and preferences in the context of termination of services, and to client needs in the context of client transfers, although this involved attention to service needs rather than human needs. Generally, however, this revision of the Code of Ethics clearly recognized the distinction between human needs and service needs. For instance, in the section on ethical responsibility to society, the Code stated: "Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice" (section 6.01).

Here, human needs and social justice were linked together, with both being stressed. The concept of human needs was also drawn on in the code's section on social and political action (section 6.04[a]), stressing opportunities for people to address their basic human need and to the need to advocate for social conditions amenable to meeting basic human needs.

Needs, Rights, and Justice: Recent Theoretical Developments

Any overview of human need requires explanation of the relationships of theories of human need, human rights, and social justice. According to Wronka's entry on human rights in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (2008a), human rights are ultimately a "legal mandate to fulfill human need." Wronka stressed that, technically speaking, needs exist

while rights do not, except to the extent they are put into place and enforced (Wronka, 2008B).

Dean (Dean, 2013, 2015) stressed the relationship of needs to rights, including the view that negotiation among people as to how to recognize, claim, and address needs leads to the formulation of rights in relation to social citizenship at the local, national, and global levels.

Advocates shouldn't be focused only on satisfaction of needs (McCloskey, 1976), but failure to identify needs weakens the enforcement of rights based upon them (Bay, 1980) and hinders identifying obligations to address needs and respect rights (Wringe, 2005).

Wakefield utilized Braybrooke's philosophy of needs in his work on the relationship of psychotherapy to social justice (Braybrooke, 1968; Wakefield, 1988). Noonan pointed out that conceptualizations of rights often give primacy of place to property rights in a way that can inhibit the meeting of human needs (Noonan, 2005). One way of reconciling the vocabularies of needs and rights is to better conceptualize human obligations (Wringe, 2005). Wronka has pointed out that duties to the community are recognized in Article 29 of the International Declaration of Human Rights (Wronka, 1992). Amartya Sen pointed out in *Development as Freedom* that basic political and liberal rights are directly related to people's social and political participation, and their ability to exercise their claim that their economic needs be respected (Sen, 1985). Political liberty and civil rights are essential if we are to better conceptualize our needs, including our economic needs (Sen, 1999).

Dean's (2013) work stressed that negotiation among people as to how to recognize, claim, and address needs leads to the formulation of rights in relation to social citizenship at the local, national, and global levels. Despite these advances in theories of human need, debate continues about whether one can speak of universal human needs and rights. The complex relationship of human rights and human needs as concepts, and their relevance for social work, have received a good deal of attention from James Ife, whose work is discussed below.

The Work of James Ife on Human Rights and Human Needs

The dissertation of James Ife resulted in published work (1980) that contended that human needs had been a central concept for the social services. Services were often designed with the needs of individuals and social groups in mind, often determined via some needs assessment. However, the nature of the needs so assessed was often undefined, due to a lack of conceptual exploration. Ife later contended that social work

should transcend needs-based approaches and adhere to rights-based practice, although he recognized the value of discussing needs in relation to rights (Ife, 2001). In his Hokenstad International Social Work Lecture (2007), Ife advocated for a strong focus on human rights and social justice for international social work.

Ife's 2009 book focused on fully explaining the conceptual foundation for two concepts, human rights and community development (Ife, 2009). He recognized that there is a contradiction between the requirements of our economic system and the rights and needs of people. He decried the failure of the global economy to address local needs, and stressed a definition of need that involved the community defining its needs and mobilizing to address them. In conceptualizing rights and need, Ife critiqued overly universalistic thinking about human rights by stressing the need to link them to specific local needs, referring specifically to the Doyal and Gough THN. He criticized Doyal and Gough for constructing a universal and positivistic theory of objective needs that implied rights. If anything, he suggested, it would be the reverse, with universal rights leading to locally constructed needs. As an alternative to positivism, Ife drew on interpretive social science and critical theory. Ife suggested the value of postmodernism's opposition to the dominance of master narratives, including those of human rights.

In his most recent book (2013), however, Ife's thinking about human needs and his use of THN evolved. He continued to view basic needs involving adequate minimum standards as difficult to define, given the environmental and cultural conditions in which they would need to be defined. However, he contended that it is very important to stress human rights to adequate dietary impact, citing Doyal and Gough (1991) favorably in that regard. Ife pointed out that social justice is often discussed in terms of need, and this is fundamental for social policy and planning.

He provided a lengthy rendition of the central tenets of THN with respect to the universalism and relativism of human need. Ife (2013) followed the logic of his stress on the process of defining rights and needs to draw new conclusions.

Future Trends and Opportunities

Future trends and opportunities will be addressed with a series of questions. As this article has demonstrated, there are now two extant and substantially compatible theories of human needs, SDT and THN, which are increasingly informing social work practice and research. Additionally, there is a TIME model for how to think critically about using theories of common human needs (Jani & Reisch, 2011), and an approach to the use of human needs and human rights discourse in social development (Ife, 2013). Will social

work incorporate human needs concepts more fully in years to come? Perhaps a start to answering this question is to pose a series of questions.

Is it possible to systematically analyze, within group and between group, similarities and differences in how people and communities interpret and address human needs? Would this in turn make it more possible to recognize how human needs, human rights, and social justice are related to each other as concepts central to the social work profession? Can the recent work of Ife (2013) suggest new ways to think about human rights in relation to human needs? Can the work of Jani and Reisch (2011) suggest ways of incorporating needs concepts into social work practice?

As is often the case with path-dependent institutional practices (Tucker, 1996), will social work stay on the path set in recent decades? This path has been marked by widespread assumptions about human needs (Jani & Reisch, 2011), but little explicit use of needs concepts (Dover & Joseph, 2008). Once a concept falls into disuse by an organization central to the organizational field, the theory of institutional isomorphism would suggest that organizations within that field would likewise neglect that concept (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Conversely, now that the Council on Social Work Education (2015) requires “knowledge of theories of human need and social justice” (p. 5), will there be an upsurge in use of human needs theory?

After all, path-dependent processes are not necessarily permanent, especially if there are new co-occurring institutional developments (North, 1993). For one example, the concept of empowerment saw a rapid increase in usage following the work of Gilbert (1974) and Solomon (1976). Does this show that a neglected theoretical discourse can quickly become central to social work's theory base? Is human need theory such a neglected theoretical perspective?

The present review would suggest that much of the theory and research about human needs is taking place within the liberal arts foundation of social work but has yet to be fully applied within social work. Will one influence on future trends and opportunities for incorporating human needs content be the extent to which the profession embraces our interdisciplinary knowledge base (Tucker, 2008)?

Given the infinity and enormity of the human need social workers face daily, do we have a moral dilemma of the sort suggested by Rossiter (2011)? Do we jettison all theories due to the risk we will totalize and oversimplify the single other person facing us, and make false assumptions about their and our human needs? Or should we instead guide our actions, in part at least, by the lessons of our own and other's best efforts at social theory? Should we engage our clients and communities in discourse and struggles about

needs (Fraser, 1989)? Could we better respond to the other(s) in front of us if we pondered and debated and sought to utilize theories about the nature of our human needs?

Further Reading

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